

# Henrik Ibsen

*Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, August 8, 2002 Updated: May 18, 2006

**Born:** March 20, 1828 in Skien, Norway

**Died:** May 23, 1906 in Oslo, Norway

**Nationality:** Norwegian

**Occupation:** Playwright

## Writings

- **1850:** (Under pseudonym Brynjolf Bjarme) *Catilina* (three-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway; also see below), P. F. Steensballe, published as *Catiline*, 1921.
- **1851:** *Norma, eller En politikers kjaerlighed* (three-act opera; title means "Norma; or, The Loves of a Politician"; produced in Christiania, Norway), 1851.
- **1850:** *Kjaempehoien* (one-act play, produced in Christiania, Norway; also see below), 1854, translated by Anders Orbek as *The Warrior's Barrow*, [New York, NY], 1921.
- **1853:** *Sancthansnatten* (three-act play; title means "St. John's Eve"; produced in Bergen, Norway, 1853), 1909.
- **1855:** *Fru Inger til Ostraat* (five-act play; produced at Den Nationale Scene; also see below), 1857, translated as *Lady Inger of Ostraat*, 1890, translated as *Mistress Inger at Ostraat*.
- **1856:** *Gildet p&aring; Solhaug* (three-act play; produced at Den Nationale Scene; also see below), C. Tonsberg, 1856, translated as *The Feast at Solhaug*, 1906, also known as *The Banquet of Solhaug*.
- **1857:** *Olaf Liljekrans* (three-act play; produced at Den Nationale Scene; also see below), 1856.
- **1858:** *Haermaendene p&aring; Helgeland* (four-act play; produced in Bergen, Norway), H. J. Jensen (Christiania, Norway), 1858, translated as *The Vikings at Helgeland*, 1890, translated as *The Warriors at Helgeland*.
- **1862:** *Kjaerlighedens Komedie* (three-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway, 1873), H. J. Jensen (Christiania, Norway), 1862, translated as *Love's Comedy*, 1894.
- **1862:** *Terje Vigne* (poetry), translated by H. F. Rosing, Folkebladet Publishing (Minneapolis, MN), 1917.
- **1864:** *Kongs-emnerne* (five-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway; also see below), J. Dahl (Christiania, Norway), 1864, translated as *The Pretenders*, 1890.
- **1866:** *Brand* (five-act play; produced in Stockholm, Sweden, 1885), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway).
- **1867:** *Peer Gynt* (five-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway, 1876; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway, ), 1867, adapted as *The Richard Mansfield Acting Version of Peer Gynt*, Reilly & Britton (Chicago, IL), 1906.
- **1869:** *De Unges Forbund* (five-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway, 1869; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1869, translated as *The Young Men's League*, Baker, 1869, translated as *The League of Youth*, 1890, translated as *The Young Men's Union*.
- **1871:** *Digte af [Henrik Ibsen](#)* (poetry), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), translated as *Lyrics and Poems from Ibsen*, 1912.
- **1873:** *Kejser og Galilaeer* (ten-act play; produced in Leipzig, Austria, 1896; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1873, translated as *The Emperor and the Galilean*, 1876.
- **1877:** *Samfundets Stotter* (four-act play; produced at Mollergaten Theatre, 1878; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1877, translated as *The Pillars of Society*, 1888.
- **1879:** *Et Dukkehjem: Skuespil* (three-act play; produced in Copenhagen, Denmark, 1879;

also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1879, translated by T. Weber as *Nora*, [Copenhagen, Denmark], 1880, translated by William Archer as *A Doll's House*, Unwin (London, England), 1889.

- **1881:** *Gengangere* (three-act play; produced in Chicago, IL, 1882; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1881, translated by Henrietta Frances Lord as *Ghosts: A Drama of Family Life*, Lily, 1890.
- **1882:** *En Folkefiende* (five-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway, 1883; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1882, translated as *An Enemy of Society*, 1888, translated as *An Enemy of the People*.
- **1884:** *Vildanden* (five-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway, 1895; also see below), 1884, translated as *The Wild Duck*, 1890.
- **1886:** *Rosmersholm* (four-act play; produced in Christiania, Norway, 1887; also see below).
- **1888:** *Fruen fra Havet* (five-act play; produced in Weimar, Germany, 1889; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1888, translated by Eleanor Marx-Aveling as *The Lady from the Sea*, Unwin (London, England), 1890.
- **1888:** *The Pillars of Society and Other Plays* (contains *The Pillars of Society*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of Society*), edited with an introduction by Havelock Ellis, Whittaker.
- **1890:** *Hedda Gabler* (four-act play; produced in Munich, Germany, 1891; also see below), 1890, translated by Edmund Gosse as *Hedda Gabler*, United States Book Company, 1891.
- **1890:** *Ibsen's Prose Dramas*, edited and translated by William and Charles Archer, Scribner (New York, NY).
- **1892:** *Bygmester Solness: Skuespil* (three-act play; produced in Trondheim, Norway, 1893; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1892, translated by Edmund Gosse and William Archer as *The Master Builder*, Tait (New York, NY), 1893.
- **1894:** *Lille Eyolf* (three-act play; produced in Berlin, Germany, 1895; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1894, translated by William Archer as *Little Eyolf*, Stone & Kimball, 1894.
- **1896:** *John Gabriel Borkman* (four-act play; produced in Helsingfors, 1897; also see below), 1896, translated by William Archer, Stone & Kimball, 1897.
- **1898:** *Samlede Vaerker* (collected works), twenty-one volumes, Gyldendal (Christiania, Norway), 1898-1902.
- **1899:** *Naar vi dode vaagner: en dramatisk epilog* (three-act play; produced in Stuttgart, Germany, 1900; also see below), F. Hegel (Christiania, Norway), 1899, translated by William Archer as *When We Dead Awaken: A Dramatic Epilogue*, H. S. Stone, 1900.
- **1904:** *Breve fra Henrik Ibsen* (letters), translated John Nilsen Laurvik and Mary Morison as *Letters of Henrik Ibsen*, Fox, Duffield, 1905.
- **1906:** *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen* (contains *The Feast at Solhaug*, *Lady Inger of Ostraat*, *The League of Youth*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Rosmersholm*), thirteen volumes, translated and edited by William Archer, Scribner (New York, NY), 1906-1912.
- **1910:** *Speeches and New Letters of Henrik Ibsen*, translated by Arne Kildal, introduction by Lee M. Hollander, R. G. Badger.
- **1910:** *P&aring; vidderne*, translated by William Norman Guthrie as *On the Heights: A Tragedy in Lyrical Ballads*, University of the South (Sewanee, TN).
- **1911:** *The Works of Henrik Ibsen*, Viking (New York, NY), 1911-1912.
- *Early Plays: Catiline, The Warrior's Barrow, Olaf Liljekrans by Henrik Ibsen*, 1921.
- **1927:** *Plays* (contains *A Doll's House*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Master Builder*), introduction by Frank Wadleigh Chandler, Macmillan (New York, NY).
- **1935:** *Eleven Plays of Henrik Ibsen* (contains *The Master Builder*, *The Pillars of Society*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *The Wild Duck*, *The League of Youth*, *Rosmersholm*, and *Peer Gynt*), introduction by H. L. Mencken, Modern Library (New York, NY).

- **1941:** *The Best Known Works of Ibsen*, Book League of America.
- **1954:** *Pillars of Society, The Pretenders, Rosmersholm*, three volumes, translated by R. Farquharson Sharp and Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Dutton (New York, NY).
- **1957:** *Four Plays: An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Hedda Gabler, The Lady from the Sea*, introduction by Carl van Doren, Grosset (New York, NY).
- **1957:** *In the Mountain Wilderness, and Other Works*, translated by Theodore Jorgenson, St. Olaf College Norwegian Institute.
- **1957:** *Six Plays* (contains *A Doll's House, Ghosts, An Enemy of the People, Rosmersholm, Hedda Gabler*, and *The Master Builder*), translated by Eva Le Gallienne, Modern Library (New York, NY).
- **1959:** *The Master Builder and Other Plays* (contains *Rosmersholm, John Gabriel Borkman*, and *Little Eyolf*), translated by Una Ellis-Fermor, Penguin (New York, NY).
- **1960:** *When We Dead Awaken and Three Other Plays*, translated by Michael Meyer, Doubleday (New York, NY).
- **1960:** *The Oxford Ibsen*, edited by James Walter McFarlane, Oxford (New York, NY).
- **1963:** *The League of Youth and Emperor and Galilean*, translated and edited by James McFarlane, Oxford (New York, NY).
- **1965:** *Four Major Plays* (contains *A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, The Wild Duck*, and *The Master Builder*), translated with a foreword by Rolf Fjelde, New American Library (New York, NY).
- Contributor and editor of *Andhrimner* (periodical). Ibsen's works have been translated into English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, and other languages.

Poet, playwright, and essayist. Apprentice to pharmacist in Grimstad, Norway, beginning c. 1843; Bergen National Theatre, Bergen, Norway, 1851-57, began as theater adviser, became resident dramatist and stage director; Norwegian Theatre, Christiania (now Oslo), Norway, artistic director and manager, 1857-62; Christiania Theatre, literary adviser, 1863; self-imposed exile in Rome, Italy, 1864-91.

Honorary degree from University of Uppsala, 1877.

Born March 20, 1828, in Skien, Norway; died of complications resulting from a series of strokes, May 23, 1906, in Christiania (now Oslo), Norway; son of Knud (in business) and Marichen (Altenburg) Ibsen; married Susannah Thoresen, 1858; children: fathered an illegitimate child at age eighteen, (first marriage) Sigurd. *Education:* Attended University of Christiania, early 1850s.

"In the English-speaking world today Henrik Ibsen has become one of the three major classics of the theatre," wrote Martin Esslin in an essay included in *Ibsen and the Theatre: The Dramatist in Production*. "Shakespeare, Chekhov and Ibsen are at the very centre of the standard repertoire, and no actor can aspire to the very first rank unless he has played some of the leading roles in the works of these three giants." Esslin further noted that, of the three, "Ibsen occupies a central position which marks the transition from the traditional to the modern theatre." Hailed as one of the pioneers of modern drama, Ibsen broke away from the romantic tradition of nineteenth-century theater with his realistic portrayals of individuals, his focus on psychological concerns, and his investigation into the role of the artist in society. Ibsen was a revolutionary in approach. As James Huneker noted in his *Essays*, Ibsen transposed themes "hitherto treated epically, to the narrow, unheroic scale of middle-class family life." He brought tragedy to the quotidian in what Huneker referred to as a "tuning down of the heroic." Although Ibsen himself denied advocating political and social movements, concentrating

instead on the importance of personal development, his plays were interpreted by his contemporaries as promoting feminism and free love while decrying middle-class hypocrisy and social conventions, many of which were of religious origin. He was, in short, scandalous in his day. "Ibsen was the best-hated artist of the nineteenth century," commented Hunecker.

Ibsen was also one of the most revered. While initially utilizing conventions associated with the "well-made play," including exaggerated suspense and mistaken identity, Ibsen later used dialogue, commonplace events, and symbolism to explore the elusiveness of self-knowledge and the restrictive nature of traditional morality. A pioneer in the use of oblique dialogue and misdirection, Ibsen once wrote, "I prefer to ask; 'tis not my task to answer." Ibsen did not establish distinct dichotomies between good and evil, but instead provided a context in which to explore the complexities of human behavior and the ambiguities of reality. Esslin explained: "Ibsen can . . . be seen as one of the principal creators and well-springs of the whole modern movement in drama, having contributed to the development of all its diverse and often seemingly opposed and contradictory manifestations: the ideological and political theatre, as well as the introspective, introverted trends which tend towards the representation of inner realities and dreams." As such, his plays have influenced writers from Anton Chekhov to Harold Pinter and Berthold Brecht. Beyond such influence, Ibsen's plays remain a vital part of the dramatic repertoire for their rich story value. Dramatic pieces such as *Ghosts*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Wild Duck*, and *The Master Builder*, among the playwright's nearly thirty plays, still find vital performance and production in theaters around the world, their messages of individualism and moral responsibility proving every bit as relevant to the twenty-first century as they did to Ibsen's world on the brink of the twentieth.

## Apprentice Playwright

Ibsen was born to wealthy parents in Skien, a lumbering town south of Christiania (now Oslo), Norway, the second son in a family of six children. The family was reduced to poverty when his father's general store failed in 1834. Ibsen's father had to mortgage most of his possessions to pay off his debts, an experience that stayed with Ibsen all his life, to be recreated in the play *John Gabriel Borkman*. Another early influence on the future dramatist was an early fear that he was an illegitimate child, another theme that runs through plays such as *The Wild Duck*. After leaving school at age fifteen, Ibsen was apprenticed for six years as a pharmacist's assistant in Grimstad. During these years, he fathered an illegitimate child with a maid in his master's house. Throughout his early years, Ibsen was described as a quiet and rather unassuming youth, not one to mix with the rough country lads of his hometown or of the town of his apprenticeship.

Ibsen wrote his first drama, *Catilina* (*Catiline*), named after the conspirator who tried to overthrow ancient Rome, in 1848-49. Influenced by the storm of revolution sweeping over Europe, this work generated little interest and was not produced until several years later. Nonetheless, it evidenced Ibsen's emerging concerns with the conflict between guilt and desire. While *Catiline* is a traditional romance written in verse, Ibsen's merging of two female prototypes--one conservative and domestic, the other adventurous and dangerous--foreshadowed the psychological intricacies of his later plays. In 1850 he went to Christiania hoping to continue his studies at Christiania University. He failed the Greek and mathematics portions of the entrance examinations, however, and was not admitted, but did manage to find like-minded friends who were also influenced by the radical political times. During this time, he read and wrote poetry, which he would later say came more easily to him than prose.

Shortly after writing *Catiline*, Ibsen became assistant stage manager at the Norwegian Theater in Bergen, where his duties included composing and producing an original drama each year. Ibsen was expected to write about Norway's glorious past, but because Norway had only recently acquired its independence from Denmark after five hundred years, medieval folklore and Viking sagas were his only sources of inspiration. Although these early plays were coldly received and are often considered insignificant, they further indicated the direction Ibsen's drama was to take, especially in their presentation of strong individuals who come in conflict with the oppressive social mores of nineteenth-century Norwegian society. In 1857 he married Susannah Thoresen, a woman whose dramatic temperament provided him with a template for his future heroines. In 1862, verging on a nervous breakdown from overwork, Ibsen began to petition the government for a grant to travel and write. He was given a stipend in 1864, and various scholarships and pensions subsequently followed. For the next twenty-seven years he lived in Italy and Germany, returning to Norway only twice. While critics often cite Ibsen's bitter memories of his father's financial failure and his own lack of success as a theater manager as the causes for his long absence, it is also noted that Ibsen believed that only by distancing himself from his homeland could he obtain the perspective necessary to write truly Norwegian drama. Ibsen explained: "I could never lead a consistent life [in Norway]. I was one man in my work and another outside--and for that reason my work failed in consistency too."

## The Early Work

Ibsen's work is generally divided by critics into three phases. The first consists of his early dramas written in verse and modeled after romantic historical tragedy and Norse sagas: *Gildet p&aring;* *Solhaug* (*The Feast of Solhaug*), *Fru Inger til Ostraat* (*Lady Inger of Ostraat*), *Haermaendene p&aring;* *Helgeland* (*The Vikings at Helgeland*) and *Kjaerlighedens Komedie* (*Love's Comedy*). These plays are noted primarily for their idiosyncratic Norwegian characters and for their emerging elements of satire and social criticism. In *Love's Comedy*, for example, Ibsen attacks conventional concepts of love and explores the conflict between the artist's mission and his responsibility to others.

*Brand*, an epic verse drama, was the first play Ibsen wrote after leaving Norway and was the first of his works to earn both popular and critical attention. The story of a clergyman who makes impossible demands on his congregation, his family, and himself, *Brand* reveals the fanaticism and inhumanity of uncompromising idealism. Set in a coastal village in Norway in the mid-nineteenth century, the play features the eponymous preacher who sees his mission in life as nothing less than the salvation of man. Brand takes on danger to fulfill this mission, accompanied by his wife, Agnes, whom he has won from a school friend. Together the two have a son, Ulf. When Brand's mother is dying and wishes to see her son, he refuses until she renounces her wealth, and the woman dies without seeing her son. A doctor friend advises Brand to be more compromising, but when Ulf falls ill and only a change of climate will save him, again Brand refuses to bend, staying in his village. Soon his son dies. Building a new church demands his focus; when it is completed his wife too is dead. Finally, taking his flock to the mountains, they turn against him, and Brand is killed in an avalanche, along with a local witch. While commentators suggest that Brand--who was said to have been patterned on the Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard--is a harsh and emotionally inaccessible character, they also recognized that this play reflects Ibsen's doubts and personal anguish over his poverty and lack of success.

In comparison to *Brand*, the protagonist of Ibsen's next drama, *Peer Gynt*, while witty, imaginative, and vigorous, is incapable of self-analysis. Although this play, based on a folk hero, takes on

universal significance due to Ibsen's use of fantasy, parable, and symbolism, it is often described as a sociological analysis of the Norwegian people. Peer has been called Ibsen's Falstaff for the way in which he blunders through life and loves, pursuing his ideal woman, Solveig, from Norway to Morocco, where he becomes wealthy in the slave trade. All the while, Solveig is waiting in the house Peer has built for her. Through the years Peer continues his picaresque adventures, until finally Solveig holds him in her arms, both of them now old. *Peer Gynt* is a central work in Norwegian literature, comprising elements from the nationalistic and romantic atmosphere of the preceding period and yet satirizing these elements in a spirit of realism akin to the period that was coming. It has become something of a national epic, one of those desert-island choices for Norwegians through the ages. Considered by some to be among Ibsen's masterpieces, *Peer Gynt* was his last verse drama.

## Plays of Social Realism

By 1868, Ibsen had become perhaps the most famous Scandinavian living outside his country. Invited to be Norway's representative at the opening of the Suez Canal, he was decorated by the Danish government in 1870, and honored by a student torchlight procession in Christiania two years later. His plays were being translated into several languages--including English--and his fame was spreading. During what critics call the second phase of his career, Ibsen wrote prose dramas concerned with social realism. The first of these plays, *De Unges Forbund* (*The League of Youth*), a caustic satire of the condescending attitudes of the Norwegian upper class, introduced idiomatic speech and relied upon dialogue rather than monologue to reveal the thoughts and emotions of the characters. Written, as Ibsen declared, "without a single monologue, or even without a single aside," *The League of Youth* evidenced Ibsen's shift from an emphasis on grandiose plot structures to characterization and interpersonal relationships.

During his stay in Munich, when he was becoming increasingly aware of social injustice, Ibsen wrote *Samfundets Stotter* (*The Pillars of Society*). A harsh indictment of the moral corruption and crime resulting from the quest for money and power, this drama provided what Ibsen called a "contrast between ability and desire, between will and possibility." The protagonist, Consul Bernick, while first urging his son to abide by conventional morality and become a "pillar of society," eventually experiences an inner transformation and asserts instead: "You shall be yourself, Olaf, and then the rest will have to take care of itself."

Ibsen's next drama, *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*), is often considered a masterpiece of realist theater. The account of the collapse of a middle-class marriage, this work, in addition to sparking debate about women's rights and divorce, is also regarded as innovative and daring because of its emphasis on psychological tension rather than external action. This technique required that emotion be conveyed through small, controlled gestures, shifts in inflection, and pauses, and therefore instituted a new style of acting. With this play Ibsen also liberated theater from the narrow bonds of entertainment, turning it into a forum for the exposition and discussion of social issues, in this case, the role of women in society. In the play, Nora is caught in a loveless marriage with Torvald, who, though not unkind, treats her like a child. In fact, Nora's relationship with her husband is not unlike that she had with her own father. Nora has been forced, at an earlier time, to deceive her husband to save his life. When money was required to finance a trip that would save her ill husband's life, Nora forged her dying father's signature on a loan, then lied to her husband that her father had given them the money. She has secretly been paying off this loan, but now is discovered in her duplicity. Her deception is revealed when a bank clerk, privy to the falsified loan, is fired by Torvald and exacts

revenge by revealing all. When he learns of it, the only thing Torvald can think of is his own reputation, accusing Nora of being an unfit mother. Once she sees the selfishness and self-centeredness of her husband so clearly displayed, Nora decides that she can no longer play the role of a doll, and leaves both husband and children.

So scandalous was this ending--a mother abandoning her children--that Ibsen was forced to write an alternate ending to the play in which Nora decides that her children need her more than she needs her freedom. Such an ending was to be used only when necessary, but rankled the prickly Ibsen. Hailed by feminists of the age as a manifesto for equal rights, *A Doll's House* was not, according to its author, intended as any such thing. Rather it was an investigation of a social dilemma; it was not meant as a solution to any social problem but as an incitement to discussion. This play, which premiered in 1879 in Copenhagen, quickly became a publishing event, its first printing immediately selling out. Translations followed and *A Doll's House* soon found itself in the repertoire of companies around the world. "The heart of the play," wrote David Thomas in his *Henrik Ibsen*, "is a detailed exploration of Nora's character and the nature of her relationship with her husband. Underneath Nora's playful exterior, there is from the start an intuitively serious mind. . . . Ibsen's major thematic concern was to explore the notion of freedom and responsibility juxtaposed with the inhibiting force of determinism. . . . *A Doll's House* was quite correctly interpreted by Ibsen's contemporaries as an attack on conventional bourgeois marriage (although not on marriage *per se*). It was intended to be a profoundly revolutionary play." *A Doll's House* was revolutionary not only in theme, but also in technique, as George Bernard Shaw pointed out in his *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*: "Up to a certain point in the last act, *A Doll's House* is a play that might be turned into a very ordinary French drama by the excision of a few lines, and the substitution of a sentimental happy ending for the famous last scene. . . . But at just that point in the last act, the heroine very unexpectedly . . . stops her emotional acting and says: 'We must sit down and discuss all this that has been happening between us.' And it was by this new technical feature, this addition of a new movement, as musicians would say, to the dramatic form, that *A Doll's House* conquered Europe and founded a new school of dramatic art." Ibsen had succeeded in taking theater beyond the halls of the auditorium.

*Gengangere (Ghosts)* and *En Folkefiende (An Enemy of the People)* are the last plays included in Ibsen's realist period. In *Ghosts* Ibsen uses a character infected with syphilis to symbolize how stale habits and prejudices can be passed down from generation to generation. On a remote Norwegian fjord, Helen Alving is preparing the dedication of an orphanage in honor of her deceased husband. But the dead Mr. Alving was anything but a paragon of virtue: an alcoholic and profligate, he drove his wife away from him emotionally and physically. She sent her only child, Oswald, off to Paris to escape the influence of the man. However, now that her son is coming back for the opening of the orphanage, the ghosts from the past come to haunt the present. Oswald falls in love with the maid, Regina, who is, in fact, the illegitimate daughter of Oswald's own father. Mrs. Alving must tell Oswald this, destroying the cloth of lies she has constructed about her dead husband. And worse, she must tell Oswald of the terrible inheritance the man passed to his son. Oswald is dying of congenital syphilis. Truth does not necessarily illuminate in this case: Oswald seems lost in the insanity of his stage of the disease by the time he learns of all this. If *A Doll's House* caused scandal, *Ghosts* produced something more like moral outrage, for Ibsen had mentioned the unmentionable to staid society of the day. Premiered in 1882, the play was not produced by any large Scandinavian theater for many years. In Germany, the police initially forbade any public performances, and in England it was not performed until 1891, and then received critical disparagement for its supposedly debased

content.

*An Enemy of the People* demonstrates Ibsen's contempt for what he considered stagnant political rhetoric. The play finds its setting in yet another small Norwegian coastal town, this one renowned for its healthful underground springs. Dr. Thomas Stockmann is chief medical officer of the lucrative baths, and when he discovers that the springs have become polluted by a nearby tannery, he must act to purify them. Great expense will be needed to repair the damage, but the town's mayor, Stockmann's brother Peter, requests that Stockmann bury his report. The local business folk do not want the burden of such expensive repair to the baths and the underground pipes. Stockmann refuses to keep his findings secret, but finds that he is in a minority. His steadfastness in this case ultimately earns Stockmann and his family ostracism in the town, but he is resolute, in the end planning to open a school for poor children. In this play Ibsen is presenting--in symbolic form--his own distaste for the hypocrisy and destructive force of blind convention which greeted his earlier plays such as *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. Here an idealist takes a moral stance despite the terrible costs, and, in his own way, prevails. This play did much, in fact, to bring Ibsen back into favor with theater audiences and critics of the day. It is "the least poetical, the least imaginative, the one which makes least appeal to our sensibilities," according to William Archer writing in the introduction to a 1911 edition of *An Enemy of the People*. "It is straightforward satiric comedy, dealing exclusively with the everyday prose of life. . . . Yet *An Enemy of the People* takes a high place in the second rank of Ibsen works, in virtue of its buoyant vitality, its great technical excellence, and the geniality of its humor." Such a breather from hard-hitting issues was needed for Ibsen's career, for audiences accustomed to the Romantic sentimentality of the "well-made play" were initially taken aback by Ibsen's controversial subjects. However, when dramatists Bernard Shaw and Georg Brandes, among others, defended Ibsen's works, the theater-going public slowly began to accept drama as social commentary and not merely as entertainment.

## Transitional Plays

With *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*) and *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen entered a period of transition during which he continued to deal with modern, realistic themes, but made increasing use of symbolism and metaphor. *The Wild Duck*, regarded as one of Ibsen's greatest tragicomical works, explores the role of illusion and self-deception in everyday life. In this play, Gregers Werle, vehemently believing that everyone must be painstakingly honest, inadvertently causes great harm by meddling in other people's affairs. His excessive honesty compels Gregers to tell his old friend, Hjalmar, of his suspicions about Gina, Hjalmar's wife. Gina was once a maid in the Werle home and the mistress of Haakon Werle, Gregers's father. Hjalmar's daughter Hedvig, a sweetly innocent girl, has the same weak eyes as the older Werle. It is clear to Gregers that this girl is not really Hjalmar's daughter at all. When he tells his friend of these suspicions, Hjalmar's life is shattered. The young Hedvig, keeper of the wild duck of the title, is rejected by her beloved father. Gregers suggests that she make a sacrifice of the wild duck she keeps in the attic to win him back; instead she shoots herself. At the end of *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen's implication that humankind is unable to bear absolute truth is reflected in the words of the character named Relling: "If you rob the average man of his illusion, you are almost certain to rob him of his happiness."

*Hedda Gabler* concerns a frustrated aristocratic woman and the vengeance she inflicts on herself and those around her. Taking place entirely in Hedda's sitting room shortly after her marriage, this play has been praised for its subtle investigation into the psyche of a woman who is unable to love others



or confront her sexuality. Hedda is married to a young scholar, George Tesman, and is rather bored at the prospects of her new life. Earlier she had a strangely voyeuristic relationship with Eilert Loevborg, something of a dissolute rake as a young man, but also uncommonly intelligent. She would listen to his tales of the dissolute life, but when he made advances to her, she chased him away with a pistol. Now Eilert is a respected historian who is a threat to her own husband's advancement. She proceeds to destroy this missed opportunity from her youth, managing to tease him back into his hedonistic drinking and womanizing ways for one night. Drunk, Eilert misplaces a manuscript he has long worked on. Hedda's husband finds it and wants to return it, but Hedda instead burns it, swearing her husband to secrecy. When Eilert comes looking for it, Hedda professes ignorance, but allows him to take one of her father's pistols to do the honorable thing and kill himself. However, nothing turns out the way Hedda originally plans, neither Eilert's supposedly heroic death nor her own pleasure in his demise. In the end the discovery of her pistol implicates her in Eilert's death, and she shoots herself with the twin pistol, frustrated in her efforts to control the lives of others. "Hedda Gabler has no ethical ideals at all," wrote Shaw in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, "only romantic ones. She is a typical nineteenth-century figure, falling into the abyss between the ideals which do not impose on her and the realities she has not yet discovered. The result is that though she has imagination, and an intense appetite for beauty, she has no conscience, no conviction." With this play, Ibsen brought his own take on tragedy to a new level, presenting a character negative in every way. Yet the ambiguities and psychological subtleties in Hedda's makeup made this an engaging play for audience and actors alike, guaranteeing its longevity. Its relevance to subsequent generations was witnessed by its Broadway revival in 2001, well over a century after its premier.

## **The Final Period--Return to Norway**

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 and there entered his third and final period with the dramas *Bygmester Solness* (*The Master Builder*), *Lille Eyolf* (*Little Eyolf*), *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *Naar vi dode vaagner* (*When We Dead Awaken*). In these final works, Ibsen deals with the conflict between art and life and shifted his focus from the individual in society to the individual alone and isolated. It is speculated that *The Master Builder* was written in response to Norwegian writer Knut Hamson's proclamation that Ibsen should relinquish his influence in the Norwegian theater to the younger generation. Described as a "poetic confession," *The Master Builder* centers around an elderly architect, Solness, who is obsessed with youth and not a little threatened by the younger generation. His undoing is a younger woman, Hilda, who seduces him with her youth and dreams of castles in the air. Such dreams literally lead to his destruction, for he falls from the roof of his new home, encouraged by Hilda to climb there to place a ceremonial wreath.

*Little Eyolf*, the account of a crippled boy who compensates for his handicap through a variety of other accomplishments, explores how self-deception can lead to an empty, meaningless life. The search for personal contentment and self-knowledge is also a primary theme in *John Gabriel Borkman*, a play about a banker whose quest for greatness isolates him from those who love him. In his last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, subtitled "A Dramatic Monologue," Ibsen appears to pass judgement on himself as an artist. Deliberating over such questions as whether his writing would have been more truthful if he had lived a more active life, *When We Dead Awaken* is considered one of Ibsen's most personal and autobiographical works.

After completing *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen suffered a series of strokes that left him an invalid for the five years until his death in 1906. Although audiences considered Ibsen's dramas highly

controversial during his lifetime because of his frank treatment of social problems, subsequent scholarship has focused on the philosophical and psychological elements of his plays and the ideological debates they generate. Ibsen's occasional use of theatrical conventions and outmoded subject matter has caused some critics to dismiss his work as obsolete and irrelevant to contemporary society, but others recognize his profound influence on the development of modern drama. "It was Ibsen," noted Esslin, "whose revolutionary impact and ultimate success showed that drama could be more than the trivial stimulant to maudlin sentimentality or shallow laughter which it had become . . . throughout the nineteenth century." Esslin further commented on Ibsen's metaphorical power: "It is this quality of the metaphorical power, the poetic vision behind the realistic surface of Ibsen's later plays . . . in which their real greatness and enduring impact lies. And these, precisely are the elements in Ibsen which are both highly traditional as well as continuously contemporary, continuously modern." Huneker found the lasting quality in Ibsen to be a message of hope: "Denounced as a pessimist, all his great plays have, notwithstanding, an unmistakable message of hope, from *Brand* to *When We Dead Awake*. An idealist he is, but one who has realized the futility of dreams; like all world-satirists, he castigates to purify. His realism is largely a matter of surfaces, and if we care to look we may find the symbol lodged in the most prosaic of his pieces."

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## Further Readings

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